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Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Twentieth session

Summary record (partial)* of the 421st meeting
Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Thursday, 13 September 2018, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Degener

Contents

Activities relating to General Assembly resolution 72/161 on the International Day of Sign Languages

* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Activities relating to General Assembly resolution 72/161 on the International Day of Sign Languages

Celebration of the first International Day of Sign Languages

1. **Mr. Tatić**, speaking as moderator, said that sign languages were integral to the enjoyment by deaf persons of their rights, and to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities itself, and were an important part of linguistic diversity across the globe.

Introductory remarks

2. **Ms. Momal-Vanian** (Director, Division of Conference Management), reading out a statement on behalf of Mr. Møller, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, said that the Convention enshrined the principle that sign languages were equal to spoken languages. The United Nations Office at Geneva promoted that genuine multilingualism through the provision of sign language interpretation in both International Sign and national sign languages for speakers who used sign language as their means of communication.

3. The first sign language interpreters had been recruited in September 2012 for just a couple of days. Six years on, the Office was able to provide sign language interpretation and live captioning in most of the United Nations official languages at a large number of meetings each year. Moreover, all participants had access to the captioning on their mobile devices or remotely via United Nations Web TV. In 2017 alone, the Office had organized 247 days of sign language interpretation, of which 123 days had been in International Sign and 124 in different national sign languages from all over the world. Although neither the required facilities or knowledge had been available at the beginning, three meeting rooms had now been equipped with the appropriate technology to support sign language interpretation.

4. The Office had been a pioneer in the provision of accessibility-related services, becoming a reference for the rest of the United Nations system. Despite resource constraints, it endeavoured to provide accessible services of the highest quality to all meeting participants and would seek to ensure that the Strategic Heritage Plan further enhanced the accessibility of the Palais des Nations.

5. **Mr. Webson** (Antigua and Barbuda), speaking via a pre-recorded video message, said that his Government was proud to have played a key role in the drafting and adoption of General Assembly resolution 72/161 establishing 23 September as the International Day of Sign Languages. The International Day of Sign Languages highlighted the need for further action to enable deaf and hard-of-hearing people to express themselves in their own language and thus participate fully in society. As such, it marked a milestone towards the achievement of the goal of leaving no one behind, a goal reflected in both the Convention and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To promote the use of sign language, further training must be made available, including for children in school, and also for interpreters in order to increase opportunities for users of sign language to engage in the workplace and within the community. The establishment of international programmes for sign language interpreter should be considered.

6. **Ms. Bianchi** (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), speaking on behalf of the Human Rights Council task force on secretariat services, accessibility for persons with disabilities and use of information technology, of which she was the Secretary, said that the purpose of the Council's accessibility plan, adopted in 2017, was to remove the barriers that prevented persons with disabilities from participating in and accessing the work of the Council. Accessibility was too often understood as relating only to physical barriers, with insufficient regard to overcoming the other obstacles facing persons with disabilities. Accessibility measures must, however, also encompass the provision of sign language interpretation, captioning and documents in Braille. Full accessibility required a culture change. The task force therefore sought to promote accessibility for a number of debates beyond those on disability-specific issues, in

recognition of the fact that persons with disabilities could and should contribute to all aspects of the Council's work.

7. The situation of children, adolescents and adults who were deaf had improved markedly over recent decades. However, not all of the world's deaf persons had access to the same opportunities and support. Celebrating the International Day of Sign Languages was thus of strategic political importance in maintaining the focus on the rights of those persons.

8. **Mr. Abdelmoula** (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that, while more than 70 million people communicated in sign languages worldwide, sign languages and deaf cultures and identities were yet to be officially recognized in some countries. The Convention captured the diversity of forms of communication. Rather than create new rights, it set out the specific legal obligations of States parties to address disability-based discrimination and promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities, which included language rights.

9. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights strove continuously to uphold the Committee's motto of "Nothing about us without us" and collaborated closely with the World Federation of the Deaf and its members and partners to promote language diversity. Since the inception of the Committee, the Office had ensured the availability of the necessary resources to allow for the use of sign languages during meetings. All public meetings of the Committee had International Sign interpretation, and national sign language interpretation was also often made available to facilitate the consideration of State party reports. The Office welcomed the Human Rights Council's efforts to increase its use of accessibility measures such as sign language interpretation during its meetings and encouraged all States to continue to support the promotion of full accessibility for persons with disabilities to the work of the Council.

10. **The Chair** said that the Committee was proud to be celebrating the first International Day of Sign Languages, which was an acknowledgement of the equality of the deaf community as a linguistic minority, of multilingualism as a core value of the United Nations and of the diversity of cultural identities among the disability community and the population in general. The International Day of Sign Languages was in keeping with the spirit of the Convention, in which sign language was afforded a prominent place, and particularly with its provisions on accessibility, freedom of expression, inclusive education and cultural participation. Sign language interpretation, which had been provided at the majority of the Committee's meetings, helped the Committee to function effectively and to fulfil its mandate. Indeed, sign language, like other languages, facilitated communication, which was an essential tool for protecting and promoting all human rights.

The meeting was suspended at 3.40 p.m. and resumed at 3.45 p.m.

Personal testimonies, experiences and key collective goals

11. **Mr. Murray** (World Federation of the Deaf) said that the International Day of Sign Languages showed the international community's recognition that sign languages were an integral and valuable part of society. Such recognition had come following a long struggle: deaf people had been, and indeed continued to be, punished for using their national sign languages.

12. Sign languages were used not only by deaf people and their family members, but also, increasingly, by members of the general public. While that was a positive development, it was important not to lose sight of the fact that sign languages were a necessity for deaf people. Access to language was a crucial and overlooked human right, and one that was fundamental to the enjoyment of all other human rights. Yet deaf children around the world continued to face numerous barriers to full language access. Recently, there had been cases in which education authorities, in deciding on the provision of sign language teaching, had prioritized superficial knowledge of sign language among the wider community over the linguistic needs of deaf children, which was a clear misunderstanding of the principle of inclusion. Unfortunately, such situations, which reduced deaf children's access to sign language environments, were not uncommon.

13. The Federation wished to emphasize that article 24 (3) and (4) of the Convention secured the right of deaf children to be educated alongside each other, with peers who used sign language and with teachers who were fluent in the national sign language. It called on States to realize fully the rights of family members of deaf children to learn and use sign language and on the Committee to continue to defend that right, and the rights of deaf people in general, when monitoring States parties' compliance with the Convention.

14. **Ms. Devandas Aguilar** (Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities) said that she welcomed the creation of the International Day of Sign Languages and commended the efforts made by Antigua and Barbuda and organizations of deaf people in that regard. Sign languages, in addition to their crucial role in ensuring the inclusion and participation of deaf people in society, helped to enrich linguistic and cultural diversity. There were countries around the world, however, where the national sign language was not officially recognized, where there was no awareness of the importance of sign language and where there were no sign language interpreters. There were, in addition, deaf children who were not taught in sign language, which led to illiteracy and social exclusion. Furthermore, deaf people were still underrepresented within the broader disability community, and their organizations could as a result be strong yet isolated, struggling to raise awareness of the challenges and discrimination they faced. Lack of access to information and communication also had a direct impact on deaf people's health, including their sexual and reproductive health.

15. While she noted with satisfaction that there had been an increase in the facilities available for deaf people at the United Nations offices in Geneva, full accessibility had still not been achieved. Moreover, many United Nations field offices did not provide sign language interpretation services or accessible information for deaf people and had no contact with local representative organizations. The United Nations system must serve as an example for States parties in ensuring full accessibility for the deaf community. The Secretary-General was committed to developing a system-wide disability action plan. It was important to build on that opportunity; the International Day of Sign Languages should serve as a call for action in that regard.

16. **Mr. Lovászy** said that the International Day of Sign Languages would be hugely significant for the deaf community, given that it fell on 23 September 2018, the sixty-seventh anniversary of the establishment of the World Federation of the Deaf, which had fought to preserve sign languages and deaf culture as prerequisites for the realization of the rights of deaf people. The International Day of Sign Languages provided an opportunity for members of the deaf community to openly celebrate their identity and the progress made regarding recognition of their rights.

17. Today, more and more countries were recognizing the potential of sign languages as natural languages and encouraging their use as a means of improving the situation of deaf persons in society. The International Day of Sign Languages should open up more opportunities in that regard. That was important because sign languages were a matter of identity and culture for their users, forming, shaping and strengthening them and encouraging them to live independently, according to their own choices and requirements, which must be respected and supported.

18. States parties to the Convention had a duty to take all appropriate measures to ensure that deaf persons could exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice. That duty encompassed the recognition and promotion of the use of sign languages. To that end, States parties must facilitate the learning of sign languages and foster the linguistic identity of the deaf community, including sign languages and deaf culture, in cooperation with deaf persons and their representative organizations and relevant stakeholders. Among other measures, they should employ teachers qualified in sign language, including teachers with disabilities.

19. During its interactive dialogues with States parties, the Committee had highlighted the information and communication barriers facing deaf persons, and it had adopted a number of concluding observations that addressed the issues of official recognition of sign languages and access to professional sign language interpretation services. In addition, it

had issued Views under the individual communications procedure calling for measures to be taken to ensure that deaf persons could enjoy equal rights, including the right to perform jury duty with professional sign language interpretation. The Committee's general comments No. 1 (2014) on equal recognition before the law, No. 2 (2014) on accessibility, No. 4 (2017) on inclusive education and No. 6 (2018) on equality and non-discrimination all touched on the right to have access to sign language interpretation services.

20. Much remained to be done, however, and many deaf people in many countries continued to be denied their rights. The Committee wished to reaffirm its commitment to the inclusion and dignity of all persons. It would continue to advocate for the recognition of sign languages and the promotion of their use in its interactive dialogues with all States parties to the Convention, not only for the benefit of deaf persons, but also for the enrichment of society.

21. **Mr. Tatić**, speaking as moderator, said that the Committee's jurisprudence often referred to sign language and that the current membership included Mr. Rukhledev, the first signing deaf person to sit on any human rights treaty body.

22. **Ms. Russell** (World Association of Sign Language Interpreters), speaking via a pre-recorded video message, said that official recognition of national sign languages across the world was essential. In countries with multiple sign languages, such as her own country, Canada, that recognition must extend to all the national sign languages. Language diversity was a strength that unified the deaf community, and professional sign language interpreters provided support to that process. More and more Governments were recognizing their countries' sign languages. That was a key step towards acknowledging the importance of training for sign language interpreters. Deaf persons sometimes needed the services of interpreters in order to exercise their human rights, so it was essential to make proper training available for such language professionals.

23. The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters, which worked closely with the World Federation of the Deaf, was committed to developing the skills of interpreters globally and to advancing the profession of interpreting through its International Sign Interpreter Accreditation process. She was pleased to note that, as part of its commitment to communication access for deaf persons, the United Nations had accepted the World Association's roster of qualified interpreters.

24. **Mr. Tatić**, speaking as moderator, said that he would give the floor to participants for questions and contributions.

25. **Mr. Vella** (Maltese Sign Language Council), noting that Malta had become a party to the Convention and that Maltese Sign Language had official status, asked whether there were any instances of government recognition of sign languages having given rise to specific consequences, in terms of legislation or funding.

26. **Mr. Murray** (World Federation of the Deaf) said that some 45 States parties to the Convention had recognized their national sign languages, although the level of recognition varied greatly from one country to another. Laws recognizing sign language often focused primarily on the status of the language, rather than on practical implementation measures regarding rights and access to services. A matter of concern was the failure to address the issue of access to sign language for deaf children. Many of the national members of the World Federation of the Deaf were fighting vigorously for such access, and cooperation with the Committee would be invaluable in that regard.

27. **Mr. Shimamoto** (Regional Secretariat for Asia, World Federation of the Deaf) said that only a small proportion of deaf and hard-of-hearing persons around the world currently used sign language. The World Federation of the Deaf was working to support the deaf and hard-of-hearing community in Asia. A major televised event had been planned to mark 23 September 2018 in Tokyo.

28. **Mr. Wheatley** (European Union of the Deaf) said that sign languages were a precious resource. It would be important for the Committee to look closely, when it reviewed States parties' second periodic reports, to ensure that they had accelerated their efforts to recognize their respective sign languages.

29. **Mr. Decelis** (Parliamentary Secretary for Persons with Disability and Active Ageing, Malta) said that the Maltese authorities would continue to work hard to improve services for the deaf community and to make the concept of "Nothing about us without us" a reality.

30. **Mr. Tatić**, speaking as moderator, said that he was grateful to all the participants for their contributions to the afternoon's discussion, which had served as a valuable reminder of the work carried out by the United Nations in cooperation with its partners in the disability movement, the deaf community and the sign language interpretation profession, and of the richness, importance and value of sign languages. The right to use sign languages was an issue of equality, non-discrimination and accessibility and contributed to global diversity.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 4.35 p.m.